

OPENING REMARKS AT RULE XI MEDICARE PART D HEARING

Tuesday, 02 May 2006

Representative Pete Stark (D-CA), Ranking Democrat on the Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, delivered the following opening remarks at today's hearing on Medicare Part D implementation. Ways and Means Democrats yesterday invoked Rule XI, forcing the Republican Majority to schedule an additional day of hearings on the issue.

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OPENING REMARKS AT MEDICARE PART D HEARING CALLED BY WAYS AND MEANS DEMOCRATS

WASHINGTON, DC

– Representative Pete Stark (D-CA), Ranking Democrat on the Ways and Means Health Subcommittee, delivered the following opening remarks at today's hearing on Medicare Part D implementation. Ways and Means Democrats yesterday invoked Rule XI, forcing the Republican Majority to schedule an additional day of hearings on the issue.

"I want to thank our witnesses today, and appreciate their willingness to appear before us on such short notice.

Some proponents of Part D seem to believe that appearance is more important than performance. Given the lives and dollars that are at stake, that's an unacceptable position.

This Committee should be rigorous in its oversight. We've heard time and again about this being the biggest change to Medicare since its creation, yet yesterday was our first hearing on the program since its enactment two and a half years ago. With the law affecting tens of millions of people and with up to \$1 trillion on the line over the next 10 years, we have an obligation to account for that spending and know what is happening.

While I am no fan of this particular program or the partisan process by which it was created, my Democratic colleagues and I have been very clear that we do not want it repealed. It is, however, clear to me that changes need to be made.

The Administration and Committee leadership seem to want to chalk everything up to run-of-the-mill implementation problems, and suggest that it is all being worked out. I don't believe that's the case, and neither do our constituents, objective policy experts, states, many physicians and pharmacists. The problems run far deeper than that. But, I will acknowledge there isn't much we are likely to be able to do this year. Especially if we have to resort to parliamentary tactics simply to have a discussion. We tend not to be very courageous in even-numbered years.

Once the Committee has a full and common understanding of the situation, I hope we can use what we've learned to improve the program. Yesterday's hearing, unfortunately, was only a cheerleading session.

Today's witnesses will give us a broader understanding of how this law is affecting various beneficiaries, including the most vulnerable and those for whom the law was allegedly targeted. They will help us understand why it's so difficult for beneficiaries and their advisors to navigate this confusing program.

They will help clarify the record with respect to how drug prices negotiated by the plans compare with other benchmarks. We will hear from United/AARP -- the largest Part D plan by far. Seeing as they are covering at least 4.5 million beneficiaries, and received more than \$1.4 billion from CMS for Part D, they seemed like a good witness to hear from. And we will hear about the importance of oversight and making data publicly available.

I believe the next step is to extend the May 15th deadline, and the corresponding late enrollment penalty, through the end of the year. Doing so at this late hour would achieve the goal of having a deadline to hasten enrollment, but not penalize those who have not been reached, were misinformed or otherwise couldn't navigate the system. It would only bring more healthy people into the program, which is, after all, the goal.

I look forward to today's testimony and discussion."